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TOLEDO, OHIO
BLADE

E. 181,396

S. 175,815

APR 27 1961

Clearing Up CIA's Role

AN UNNAMED top Central Intelligence Agency official told a group of newspaper editors at a Washington briefing that CIA correctly reported on the Castro regime's military power and its control over the Cuban populace before the ill-fated invasion. This ties in with the statement of one of our columnists that CIA is taking the position "more or less openly" that the estimates it furnished President Kennedy on the situation in Cuba were accurate. It is a defensive move on the agency's part.

President Kennedy, of course, has taken full responsibility for any part the United States played in the invasion failure. But CIA is widely blamed in a controversy that is bound to continue since it involves a critical area of national security. CIA is a principal in the Administration study now being made of intelligence and guerrilla war tactics. It is the target of proposed far-reaching inquiries. Certainly its role needs clearing up. More is involved than whether it passed along correct information, for the agency is also credited with sponsorship of the Cuban invasion.

The intelligence service of any government loses its value if it loses its secrecy. That is all the more reason, it seems to us, why a strong policy control should be exercised over such a service to insure that it is kept carefully in check and skillfully directed.

Our Government has come late to a so-called "cloak and dagger" service traditional among other powers. Apparently we have ignored, in a national enthusiasm for the glamorous and grandiose, some of the lessons they long ago learned.

There are indications that we have permitted CIA to grow in the dark with the same exuberance shown by other federal agencies operating in the open. It seems to have become almost a separate branch of government which, under a broad mandate, could easily lap over into areas from which it might well be excluded.

Military operations, apart from supplying information, should be out of CIA's domain. They are another kind of specialty. And if this line has not been clearly drawn in the past, it should be in the future.